

# CONFLICT RESOLUTION

## LESSON 1: FINDING SOLUTIONS: CONFLICT



*active listening*  
*aggression*  
*conflict*  
*effective speaking*  
*frustration*  
*harassment*  
*hostility*  
*miscommunication*  
*relationships*  
*solutions*  
*territorial*  
*understanding*

### INTRODUCTION

What does **conflict** mean to you? Is it frightening or exciting? Is it interesting or unpleasant? Do you typically avoid it, or are you more likely to confront it?

It is inevitable that you will encounter many different forms of conflict throughout your lifetime. In order to make appropriate decisions and gain confidence in resolving conflicts, you must be able to:

- Recognize potential conflict situations before they occur.
- Recognize the warning signs and the sequences of events that can fuel conflicts.
- Predict possible consequences and stay attuned to ways to stop the conflict from occurring (or escalating).

This chapter introduces basic guidelines to managing conflicts. You will learn about the

causes of conflict, what *you* can do to prevent them, as well as the importance of maintaining good communication in these situations.

### WHAT IS CONFLICT AND HOW DOES IT AFFECT US?

Conflict can be defined as any situation where incompatible activities, feelings, or intentions occur together. It is an everyday occurrence at home, at school, on the job, or anywhere there are people with different beliefs, values and experiences.

If not carefully managed, conflict can escalate to violence and harm your personal **relationships**, creating wounds that will never heal. When conflict is avoided, and important issues are left unresolved, it may lead to resentment, creating a tense environment. However, if you take the necessary steps to resolve a conflict, you may find that 'clearing the air' reduces tension and brings about an **understanding** that makes the relationship more open and honest in the future.

We most often find ourselves in conflict with those with whom we spend the most time: parents, friends, co-workers, teammates, etc. You must learn to recognize that your long-term relationship with these people is more important than the result of any short-term conflict. Calmly discussing issues may often bring about a quick resolution or a realization that a problem doesn't actually exist.

### CAUSES OF CONFLICT

There are many ways in which conflicts can begin: misunderstandings, embarrassment, hurt pride, prejudice, and peer pressures are just a few. Most of the factors or situations that lead

to conflict can be classified as resulting from:

- Varied perspectives on the situation
- Differing belief systems and values resulting from personal background and accumulated life experiences
- Differing objectives and interests

If you recognize a potential conflict situation early, you may be able to prevent it from escalating into a dangerous fighting situation. By applying conflict management techniques, you will be able to reduce the levels of anger and **frustration**, which will make it easier to resolve the problem.

## TYPES OF CONFLICT AND THEIR WARNING SIGNS

In order to make good decisions and effectively manage conflict in your life, you must be able to recognize the warning signs of a potential conflict situation. Most types of conflicts belong to one of the five categories listed below:

- Relationship — conflicts that occur because of strong negative emotions, stereotypes, **miscommunications**, or repetitive negative behaviors. **Harassment** is a relationship conflict.
- Data — conflicts that occur because people are misinformed or lack information to make good decisions. If you are late to the drama club meeting because you thought it started at 2:00 pm, but it actually began at 1:00 pm, then you might find yourself in a data conflict.
- Interest — conflicts that result when one party believes that in order to satisfy his or her needs, the needs of an opponent must be sacrificed. A conflict over what you perceive to be an “unfair situation,” would be an interest conflict. For example, if your whole soccer team had to run an extra five

miles at practice because John, a teammate of yours, was late for the second time this week, you would have an interest conflict.

- Structural — conflicts that arise out of limited physical resources (including time), authority, geographic constraints, organizational changes, or other external forces. A **territorial** dispute is a structural kind of conflict. Similarly, if you are scheduled to begin work at your part time job at 3:00 pm on Wednesdays, but band practice is not over until 4:00 pm, then you have a structural conflict.
- Value — when people attempt to force their own personal beliefs or values on others. For example, if a friend keeps asking you to help him cheat on his chemistry exam, you might have a value conflict on your hands. Another example of a value conflict would be the debate over capital punishment.



Although, there are many types of conflict that you may inevitably encounter, we are going to examine three common types of conflict that you may find at school, home or in your community: sexual harassment, other personal harassments (being picked-on), and “unfair” situations. Below is a description of each of these kinds of conflict and some of the warning signs that accompany them.

## SEXUAL HARRASMENT

Four out of every five students say that they are sexually harassed often or occasionally. Sexual harassment is unwelcome behavior of a sexual nature that is both demeaning and wrong. These unwelcome behaviors are sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, and other physical, verbal, or visual conduct of a sexual nature.

Specifically, it includes: explicit sexual propositions; suggestive comments; sexually oriented kidding, teasing, or practical jokes; offensive or obscene language or gestures; displays of offensive or obscene printed visual material, and physical contact of a sexual nature. The most common form of sexual harassment, although oftentimes used unintentionally or subconsciously, is to address a person as “dear,” “honey,” “sweetheart,” or some other “term of endearment.”



## OTHER PERSONAL HARRASSMENTS (BEING PICKED-ON)

Harassers use verbal, physical, or visual means to annoy or “pick on” someone, possibly because of their race, ancestry, national origin, religion, age, physical or mental disability, sex, or sexual orientation. Oftentimes, harassers like to pick on people who lack self-confidence, by using derogatory remarks, slurs, jokes, cartoons, pictures, or certain gestures that demean, ridicule, or torment the individual.

## UNFAIR SITUATIONS

“That’s not fair!” is a cry that can represent every aspect of your life’s development. It involves following rules regardless of whether you like them or not, reaching compromises with others, and respecting the rights of others. When someone makes a decision that may be fair for some, yet unfair for you and others, it is oftentimes hard to accept the answer to the questions, “From whose perspective was that decision made?” or “What criteria was used to make that decision?” Remember, fair does not mean equal.

## STRATEGIES FOR RESOLVING CONFLICTS

You have control over how you choose to deal with conflict. In some cases, the best course of action is to walk away, or do nothing at all. You may find it best to ignore the conflict if:

- The issue or situation is unimportant or trivial to you.
- You will probably not see the other person again.
- The other person is just trying to provoke a fight.

- The timing is wrong and a cooling off period is needed.

Although choosing to walk away from a conflict may be difficult, doing so in the situations described above, will demonstrate a great deal of maturity and self-control.

In other cases, however, it is best to confront the conflict. Avoiding the issue will not resolve it, and unresolved, lingering conflict can lead to resentment, **hostility**, and may even escalate to violence. In these situations, using a process to manage the conflict and establishing certain ground rules, will help you to resolve the issues peacefully. The basic steps in managing conflict are:

1. Prepare yourself to deal with the conflict
2. Find a mutually agreeable time and place
3. Define the conflict
4. Communicate an understanding
5. Brainstorm to find alternate solutions
6. Agree on the most workable solution



### *PREPARE TO DEAL WITH CONFLICT*

We all experience emotions in reaction to conflict. These emotions can include nervousness, fear, embarrassment, anger, frustration, and anxiety. These are strong feelings that can propel you into inappropriate or destructive behavior. Take time to identify your feelings. If not acknowledged, these emotions will become a barrier to resolving the conflict.

We need to maintain emotional control in order to communicate in a calm, even tone. Screaming and name-calling will only serve to worsen the situation. Some techniques that people use to remain calm and release tension in stressful situations include: deep breathing, vigorous exercise, counting to 10, pounding or yelling into a pillow, and talking to a friend.

### *FIND A MUTUALLY AGREEABLE TIME AND PLACE*

Choose a place to discuss the conflict that is comfortable, and non-threatening for both of you and where you can be alone. Some people may feel compelled to act in an **aggressive** way if they have an audience.

You should also make sure that you have chosen a time when you are both calm and ready to discuss the issues at hand.

### *DEFINE THE CONFLICT*

Two of the most important skills that you need to develop in order to effectively manage conflict are: **effective speaking** (expressing your needs, feelings, and reasons) and **active listening**. In other words, your ability to send and receive clear messages. Each person involved in the conflict must communicate, “their perspective or feelings on the situation,” “what they want,” and “why.” Be sure to describe the conflict in clear, concrete terms, focusing on behaviors, feelings,

consequences, and desired changes. Be specific and start your sentences with “I,” not “You.”

“I” messages are statements, beginning with “I,” that tell how you feel. They are the most appropriate way to express your feelings in a calm and respectful manner. By using “I” messages, your communications do not take on a blaming or accusatory tone. “I” messages have three parts: to state a feeling, to describe a specific behavior, and to state how it affects you. An example of the parts of an “I” message are shown below:

I feel (*state feeling*) when you (*describe specific behavior*) because (*state how it affects you*). For example, “I feel *hurt* when you tell someone something I told you in secret because I didn’t want anyone else to know.”

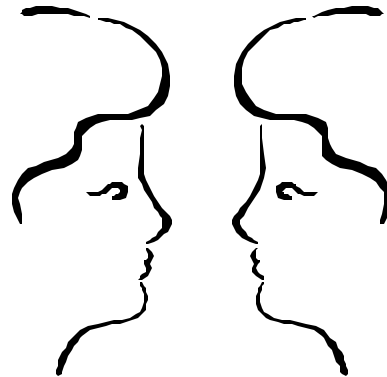
Some more guidelines for conflict resolution using Winning Colors communication tools are described later in this chapter.

### COMMUNICATE AN UNDERSTANDING

In addition to defining the conflict, each party must also feel that they have been heard and understood. This is where active listening comes into play. Request that the other person describe how the situation looks and feels from *their* perspective. Listen to really understand the other person’s feelings and needs. Try to step back and imagine how you would feel if you were in the other person’s shoes. Make sure that the other person knows that you are trying to understand his or her point of view. You may want to repeat back your understanding of what you have heard, or you could say something like, “I know this issue is important to you because...” Sometimes, however, you will find that it is necessary to agree to disagree.

### BRAINSTORM TO FIND ALTERNATE SOLUTIONS

Finally, in order to resolve a conflict, both of you must identify possible solutions. When identifying potential **solutions** to the conflict, it is important to remain positive and be open to compromise. Remember that the conflict is a problem for both of you to solve together, not a battle to be won. You should take turns offering alternative solutions, examining the consequences of each solution. Be creative and focus on solutions rather than past blame. Do not be judgmental of the other person’s ideas.



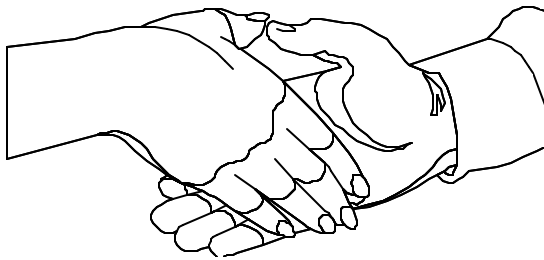
### AGREE ON THE MOST WORKABLE SOLUTION

In order to reach an agreement on a solution, you both need to be committed to resolving the conflict. The conflict ends when both parties reach an agreement that meets everyone’s needs, and is fair to both of you.

### PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

Use the chart below as an aid to help you remember the steps for effectively managing conflict in your life.

<i>I want...</i>	You both have the conflict. You must work together to solve it constructively and respectfully.
<i>I feel...</i>	You both have feelings. You must express them to resolve the conflict. Keeping anger, frustration, hurt, fear, or sadness inside only makes the conflict more difficult to resolve.
<i>My reasons are ...</i>	You both have reasons for wanting what you want and feeling as you do. Ask for each other's reasons and ensure you understand them. Recall that at times you must <u>agree</u> to <u>disagree</u> .
<i>My understanding of you is...</i>	You both have viewpoints. To resolve the conflict constructively, you must see the conflict from both sides.
<i>Maybe we should try...</i>	You both need to come up with wise agreements that make both people happy.
<i>Let's choose and shake!</i>	You <u>both</u> must select the agreement that seems fair. You should not agree on a solution that leaves one party happy and the other unhappy.



If you cannot reach an agreement, the conflict may need to be resolved through mediation or arbitration (*These topics will be discussed in Lesson 3*).

## COMMUNICATION SKILLS

While miscommunication can lead to conflict, good communication is the key to settling problems peacefully.

Language is extremely powerful. If you have ever heard the phrase “fighting words,” you know that there are some words that can escalate a conflict, and others that can be used to diffuse one. An example of some fighting words are: never, always, unless, can't, won't, don't, should, and shouldn't. Likewise, good communication is blocked when either party blames, insults, puts the other down, interrupts, or makes threats or excuses. On the other hand, words that can be used to de-escalate a conflict include: maybe, perhaps, sometimes, what if, seems like, I feel, I think, and I wonder. Try to use these words when facing a conflict situation.

Non-verbal communication, or body language, also has a tremendous impact on those who observe and interpret it. It can encourage or discourage a fight. When trying to resolve a conflict you should maintain eye contact, and use a tone of voice that is sincere and not intimidating or sarcastic. You should also keep your legs and arms uncrossed, and your fists unclenched.

Successful conflict resolution and negotiation depends on the use of positive communication skills.

## CONCLUSION

Conflict is a natural part of life. It can be positive or negative depending on how you

choose to manage it. By recognizing potential conflicts and their warning signs, and using conflict management strategies to help you make appropriate decisions, you will have confidence and be better prepared to deal with conflict in the future.